

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Loosening the Fetters

Fatimah Zainal · Wednesday, January 1st, 2014

“Almost every person I know is either drunk, stoned, caffeinated or doped up on Prozac. Every day. There’s something wrong with the world when we can’t face it without chemicals.” – Australian alternative band, ‘Angelspit’

This is a story of a typical day in the life of a young woman who wants to change the microcosm of the Muslim world she lives in but always ends up failing. A girl who wants to mobilize herself and her peers, but cannot break free from the fetters binding her to individualism.

It always starts the same way. Ripping apart the seam of sleep, I climb out of bed. I put on my clothes and shake off the smell of sleep from my hair. Sheets hastily smoothed. Pillows haphazardly fluffed up. Curtains drawn. Doors slammed shut, then locked.

Outside, the campus roads are perfumed with the sweat of yesterday’s rain. Dew glints off the overhanging tree boughs, dissipating on the red-tiled roofs of our hostels. The earth is damp; the sky an immodest blue.

Within my earshot are those familiar morning noises: of voices spilling out of open doors; of footsteps echoing through corridors; of the rhythmic swishing and sweeping and raking of dry leaves. And behind the neat row of windows, sleepers lie in their beds, ripe with warmth.

It always starts the same way. Earphones plugged in, my footsteps pound the tarmac. A glance in any direction shows University students –not unlike myself— constantly on the get-go. Most of us attached to our smartphones or tablets or even both. Eyes downcast, fingers tap-tap-tapping touchscreen devices; rosary prayers of the technologically enslaved.

I push my caffeine-addled body through the heavy traffic of people with composed faces and furtive footsteps. We walk to our destinations all the while checking the morning feed on our virtual lives. Engrossed with Twitter and Facebook timelines, with emails and website updates; we go on autopilot modes.

We are merely existing in lieu of living. And with each second spent on the virtual world, the fetters binding us to the centripetal reality gets more and more loosened. Like a rope slithering from grip. We vacillate between the equator lines of our virtual world and the reality. Our minds slip in and out of consciousness, as we alternate between our real self and our portrayed self.

In the real world, we wear a pair of hooded eyes and strained smiles. Scent cones are discharged. Skin cells are shed. Dolorous looks are exchanged. Lives intersect. Yet we never really collide. A melting pot for people from every continent on the globe: my International University is a microscopic United Nations. Day in and day out, we rub elbows with unique, nonpareil individuals from all over the world: from Moldova, Mexico, Bosnia, Indonesia, Korea, Sudan, and more; yet more often than not, we do not realize it.

Mining the vein of my morning thoughts, I unfold parenthesis after parenthesis and ankle it to my classroom.

The Introduction to Psychology lecture starts. Just like clockwork, students take out their devices. Smartphones, tabs, iPods; a means of escapism. A way to escape the boring tenor of morning lectures and imparted knowledge. Even notes are taken by the aid of these devices.

A glance in any direction shows human hulls cosseted in their alcoves of forgetting: eyes downcast, necks bent low as in prayer, shoulders slumped, fingers silently tap-tap-tapping rosary prayers of Twitter and Facebook updates.



Having coffee while checking the news.

It's
fact
that
we
cannot
stretch
our
leg
without
poking
an
ugly
truth
in the
rear.

We do not know our roommates as well as we know what Anna Kendrick or the Kardashians tweeted last night. We do not know that the quiet Indonesian brother in our class can recite The Song of Solomon in fluent Hebrew; or the fact that the outgoing sister who always sits beside us during lunch is bulimic.

So we would rather keep our eyes downcast and our shoulders an alcove to protect us against the seedy underbelly of truth. Truth is that we circumnavigate a world which is a playground for constant warfare and warped thoughts; so we use our passivity as a perennial shield.

This side of the field isn't all that green. In my mind I wonder if things could ever change. For instance I think that maybe today is the day I take a break from my climb up the rungs of the success ladder and take a good hard look at the world around me. I think that maybe today is the day that I look up when I walk and meet everyone's eyes when I smile.

Parenthesis after parenthesis unfolded and then discarded as my eyes stare unseeingly at the subtitles on the projector screen played out against the background of my professor's voice.

Then I think that maybe I'll have another cup of coffee after class, before my work shift begins, just to take the edge off paperwork and customer service. And I think that I better deep-six my distasteful observations and instead find my way into the annals of Freudian and Skinner theories. It is a far more important feat to get an A in this class.

Top image: The faces of a microscopic United Nations: [from left] Italian-Ghanaian, Indian-Malaysian, and Sudanese.

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